

Suggestions to help Children Cope with a Tragic Event

Information Sheet for parents

Whenever a tragedy occurs, children, like many people, may be confused or frightened. Most likely they will look to adults for information and guidance on how to react. Parents can help children cope by establishing a sense of safety and security. As more information becomes available, adults can continue to help children work through their emotions and perhaps even use the process as a learning experience.

Immediately following a tragic event all adults should:

Model calm and controlled behaviour. Children take their emotional cues from the significant adults in their lives. Avoid appearing anxious or frightened.

Reassure children that they are safe and (if true) so are the other important adults in their lives. Depending on the situation, point out factors that help ensure their immediate safety and that of their community.

Remind them that trustworthy people are in charge.

It is also important to:

Let children know that it is okay to feel upset. Explain that all feelings are okay when a tragedy like this occurs. Let children talk about their feelings and help put them into perspective. Children may need help and patience from adults to assist them in expressing some feelings, e.g. anger, appropriately.

Observe children's emotional state. Depending on their age, children may not express their concerns verbally. Changes in behaviour, appetite, and sleep patterns can also indicate a child's level of grief, anxiety or discomfort. Children will express their emotions differently. There is no right or wrong way to feel or express grief.

Look for children at greater risk. Children who have had a past traumatic experience or personal loss, suffer from depression or other mental illness, or with special needs may be at greater risk of severe reactions than others. Be particularly observant for those who may be at risk of self-harm or suicide. Seek the help of school staff, the GP, or a mental health professional if you are at all concerned.

Tell children the truth. Don't try to pretend the event has not occurred or that it is not serious. Your children will be more worried if they think you are too afraid to tell them what is happening.

Stick to the facts. Don't embellish or speculate about what has happened and what might happen. Don't dwell on the scale or scope of the tragedy, particularly with young children.

Keep your explanations developmentally appropriate. Young children need brief, simple information that should be balanced with reassurances that the daily structures of their lives will not change. Older children will be more vocal in asking questions about whether they truly are safe and what is being done at their school. They may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Teenagers may have strong and varying opinions. Encourage all children and young people to verbalise their thoughts and feelings. Be a good listener!

Monitor your own stress level. Don't ignore your own feelings of anxiety, grief, and anger. Talking to friends, family members, religious leaders, and mental health counsellors can help. It is okay to let your children know that you are sad, but that you believe things will get better. You will be better able to support your children if you can express your own emotions in a productive manner. Get appropriate sleep, nutrition, and exercise.

How Parents Can Help:

Focus on your child(ren) over the week following the sad event. Tell them you love them and everything will be okay. Try to help them understand what has happened, keeping in mind their developmental level.

Make time to talk with your children. Remember if you do not talk to your children about this incident someone else will. Take some time and determine what you wish to say.

Stay close to your children. Your physical presence will reassure them and give you the opportunity to monitor their reaction. Many children will want actual physical contact. Give plenty of hugs. Let them sit close to you, and make sure to take extra time at bedtime to cuddle and to reassure them that they are loved and safe.

Limit your child's television viewing, or social media awareness, of these events. If they must look at coverage, do this together for a brief time; then stop. Avoid re-watching the same events over and over again.

Maintain a "normal" routine. To the extent possible stick to your family's normal routine for dinner, homework, chores, bedtime, etc., *but don't be inflexible*. Children may have difficulty concentrating on schoolwork or falling asleep at night. Familiar routines are helpful with this as they help children feel reassured.

Spend extra time reading or playing quiet games with your children before bed. These activities are calming, foster a sense of closeness and security, and reinforce a sense of normalcy. Spend more time tucking them in. Let them sleep with a light on if they ask for it.

Safeguard your children's physical health. Stress can take a physical toll on children as well as adults. Make sure your children get appropriate sleep, exercise, and nutrition.

Consider thinking hopeful thoughts for those most affected. It may be a good time to take your children to your place of worship, write a poem, or draw a picture to help your child express their feelings and feel that they are somehow supporting victims, survivors and their families.